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Casey resigns as CIA director, citing ill health

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WILLIAM J. CASEY
Underwent cancer surgery



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ROBERT M. GATES
Nominated as successor

WASHINGTON — William J. Casey, a longtime friend and adviser to President Reagan, has resigned as director of central intelligence, citing his slow convalescence from brain cancer surgery, the White House said yesterday.

His hand-picked deputy, Robert M. Gates, who has served in government for 20 years in the Central Intelligence Agency and on the National Security Council staff, has been nominated to succeed him.

The announcement brought to a halt weeks of speculation and confusion — much of it generated by conflicting signals sent from the White House — surrounding Mr. Casey's health.

The White House has denied for weeks that a search was under way for a Casey successor. Last month, it became known that the president and White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan had discussed the job with former Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tenn.

Mr. Casey opted to resign after it became apparent that "it would be some time before he could return to duty and devote his full energies to the position," said CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster.

"He felt strongly that the agency and intelligence community and their programs require the type of vigorous leadership that he could no longer provide," she said, adding that "the decision to resign was Mr. Casey's and Mr. Casey's alone."

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Mr. Reagan did not request the resignation and accepted it with "reluctance and deep regret."

He said Mr. Casey had been asked to serve as counselor to the president if his recovery allowed such responsibilities.

"The doctors indicate they expect a full recovery," Mr. Fitzwater said. "I don't know exactly what that means, nor do I know what the timing is ... but ... if and when that time comes, the job is there."

Mr. Casey, 73, underwent surgery Dec. 18 after neurosurgeons discovered a rare lymphoma, or malignant tumor, in his brain. Mr. Fitzwater said that the condition of the CIA director — who after the operation had been unable to speak clearly or control the right side of his body, was improving and that he was "alert and he can talk."

The CIA director offered his resignation to Mr. Regan and Attorney General Edwin W. Meese III in a private visit Thursday at Georgetown

University Hospital, where Mr. Casey has been undergoing radiation therapy in order to shrink any traces of the tumor.

Mr. Fitzwater said the president, who apparently has not yet spoken with Mr. Casey, met with Mr. Gates in a private session Friday in the Oval Office to discuss the position and "the agency and the problems there."

Representative David McCurdy, D-Okla., a senior member of the House Intelligence Committee who talked with Mr. Gates yesterday, said the CIA deputy director had been assured by Mr. Reagan that he would "have access and there would be an open door."

Mr. McCurdy, in contrasting Mr. Gates with Mr. Casey, said: "I think he will be a clear-sighted and objective reporter of information and advice to the president. ... I don't think he will be an advocate of a particular position, which I feel Director Casey was."

News of Mr. Gates' nomination was generally well-received on Capitol Hill. But some members did not hesitate to note Mr. Casey's rocky relationship with Congress.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David L. Boren, D-Okla., said he had experienced "a good working relationship with Mr. Gates." He said he and the deputy CIA director had "discussed our common goal of making sure the intelligence committee and the agency will be able to share information and ideas on a completely candid basis."

Another Democratic member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, said Mr. Gates would face a number of serious questions on Capitol Hill on his role in the Iran-contra matter. For example, Mr. Leahy said, Mr. Gates may be asked if he knew the CIA was involved in "illegally helping" former White House aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North to provide aid to the contras.

Saying that Mr. Gates has a lot of damage to repair, Mr. Leahy added that the "sense of trust" between the CIA and Congress had been "breaking down very seriously" since the autumn, when allegations of illegal U.S. aid to the contras surfaced.

Mr. Casey, 73, was named to head the CIA in 1981 after helping manage Mr. Reagan's presidential campaign. Earlier, he served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and held other posts during the Nixon and Ford administrations.

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Ms. Foster said Mr. Gates, 43, who is close to Mr. Casey, was viewed as an intelligence professional. She said he had "a lot of credibility within the Congress" and "isn't an unknown."

A native of Kansas, Mr. Gates joined the CIA as an intelligence analyst in 1966 and became an adviser on strategic arms limitation in the early 1970s.

He earned a doctorate in Russian and Soviet history from Georgetown University in 1974, at which time he joined the NSC staff for a six-year stint under the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations.

Returning to the CIA in 1979, he became the CIA's national intelligence officer for the Soviet Union for two years before his appointment as deputy director for intelligence. He also held the position of chairman of the National Intelligence Council, a role in which he directed the preparation of all national intelligence estimates prepared by the intelligence community.

He was sworn in as deputy director of central intelligence last April.

Senate Minority Leader Robert J. Dole of Kansas said Senate confirmation of Mr. Gates "should be a top priority on the Hill, given the importance of stability and continuity at this crucial national security post."

The shift of leadership at the top of the intelligence agency comes at a time when questions are being raised by congressional investigators about the role played by the CIA in the unfolding Iran-contra affair.

Mr. Casey, in congressional testimony Nov. 21, maintained that the CIA was only marginally involved in the sale of U.S. arms to Iran and that the CIA did not violate the law.

Questions remain unanswered on whether the agency helped establish Swiss bank accounts that were allegedly used for diversion of money, paid by Iran for U.S. arms, to aid counterrevolutionary rebels in Nicaragua.

Nancy J. Schwerzler of The Sun's Washington Bureau contributed to this report.